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### **Review of *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. Elliot Liebow. Reviewed by Cheryl Hyde, Boston University.**

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Who has access to resources in relation to language? Print media? The arts?

The anthology's theoretical stances are grounded in the muck of women's political realities. The authors insights are scattered gems, best mined by readers endowed with a certain affection for poststructuralist discourse and its play. Readers who prefer more direct, concrete narrative about the politics of difference in feminist, social change activism work may still find the book satisfying.

*Feminism and the Politics of Difference* makes an important feminist, internationalist contribution to our literature an difference. If this dynamic and far reaching anthology is any indicator, uncharted pathways for social change praxis will continue to emerge from explorations in the politics of voice and difference. Certainly, feminists will continue to be among the storytellers and listeners.

Marti Bombyk  
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Elliot Liebow. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. New York: Free Press, 1993. \$24.00 hardcover.

While writing this review, I recalled the story of Brenda, a homeless woman who died overnight while seeking shelter in a bus stop near the HUD office ("Homelessness Hitting Home: A Death on HUD's Doorstep", *New York Times*, November 30, 1993). As her body was removed, HUD officials and White House personnel were furiously debating funding for homeless programs. Her companions' remembrances were of a woman in her thirties with a "sharp mind" and helpful nature who was afraid of shelters. Brenda's death was not anonymous because of where she died. That we know of her death only underscores how little we know of her life, or the lives of others who are homeless, because of societal indifference and government neglect.

Elliot Liebow rends this veil of invisibility in his compassionate and insightful work — *Tell Them Who I Am*. Liebow's goal is to bring the reader into the world of homeless women;

to understand their problems, struggles, victories. Fundamentally, he seeks a response to his own question — “How, in short, do they stay fully human while body and soul are under continuous and grievous assault?” (pg. 25). His answers have implications for policy, social service, and grassroots interventions. His means of discovery provide invaluable lessons for research methodology and practice.

The book opens with a preface, “A Soft Beginning”, and introductory chapter, “The Women, the Shelters, and the Round of Life”. Liebow tells how he got involved in volunteering at a shelter, which gave way to a desire to tell the stories of these women, and provides background information on some of the key informants and shelter sites. Part 1, “Problems in Living”, is a series of chapters about the daily dilemmas of being homeless. Part 2, “Making It: Body and Soul”, reveals the women’s survival strategies. He concludes with an indictment of the free market system, which treats the homeless and other poor people as surplus and judges them inferior. The Appendices include information on current situations and life histories of shelter residents, the scope of homelessness and services available, and methodology (participant observation and interviews).

Throughout the book, one is struck by how seemingly minor or taken-for-granted aspects of life become insurmountable challenges because of system requirements, not individual personality or skill deficits. For example, it is mandatory that all women be out of the shelter by 7 am, regardless of weather or health. This means that they can never sleep in (a shared fantasy of the women), and often have to fill time before starting jobs or rounds of appointment. The reader must ask her/himself what life would be like to always be on the streets, early in the morning, 7 days a week, without exception. Or consider the problem of storage of personal affects. Shelters are too risky, storage facilities too expensive. As homelessness continues, these women downsize their possessions, giving up precious mementos of a previous life. What would we give up if placed in this position?

Liebow excels in conveying these daily realities, which singularly seem insignificant until we are forced to ask ourselves how we would cope. In doing so, he helps us understand how there are many more similarities than differences between

those with and those without homes. Yet while sympathetic, Liebow neither romanticizes nor reifies these women or their experiences.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is that Liebow invited comments from shelter residents and staff. This results in some lively debates, especially with his analysis of social workers and shelter staff. Residents, who view most staff as controlling or paternalistic, clearly believe he is too soft. Even allowing for this view, Liebow nonetheless provides a sharp critique of the "homeless industry" and related government services. He underscores the lack of respect accorded the homeless, demonstrated through neglect, scorn, and intrusive questioning. The more professionalized the shelter staff, the greater the psychological degradation for the women. As one resident commented: "Both my parents are dead, you know. They were killed by social workers and psychologists who tortured them to death with questions" (p. 138). In many instances, agreement to "change one's attitude" is the condition for receiving care, suggesting a striking inability or unwillingness to understand the structural causes of homelessness.

Liebow views homelessness as a manifestation of class oppression in this country, a "direct result of a steady, across-the-board lowering of the standard of living of the American working class and lower class" (p. 224). Jobs with livable wages are increasingly scarce, families (a possible resource for the middle class) are often too financially strapped to offer much assistance, and the government money rarely invests in affordable, permanent housing. Homelessness is not a result of laziness or mental illness (though as with the larger population, there is some of both). It is caused by an economy that is "pushing people onto the street full-time — perhaps beyond the point of no return" (p. 232).

Currently, U.S. society is debating the "homeless problem". Even so-called "progressive" cities, such as Berkeley, San Francisco, and Seattle, are increasingly intolerant of the homeless. HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, reacting to Brenda's death and society's backlash against homeless, stated: "A homeless person should not have to die on the streets." He's right, of course. But

then again, as Liebow so eloquently argues, no one should have to live on the streets either.

Cheryl Hyde  
Boston University

Anne Firor Scott. *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. \$11.95 paper cover.

Hillary Rodham Clinton has been credited with creating a new paradigm for First Ladies. According to one observer, she "is coming close not just to influencing policy but [also to] making public policy." Another notes that she succeeds through "just the right combination of . . . a woman's touch with a real mastery of the policy" (*New York Times*, 22 September, 1993, p. A18). Anne Firor Scott would most likely take exception to this notion of a new paradigm. In her book, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, Scott examines the long history of women's activism in America, and documents the successful combination of "a woman's touch" (or an interest in applying the principles of a well-run, moral home life to the larger community) and the possession of organizational and political skills necessary for making changes. A major vehicle for learning and applying these skills has been the woman's association, which has existed in the United States in a variety of forms since the late 1700s.

Women's history scholars have for some time been producing dissertations, articles, monographs, and books on women's associations, generally focusing either on single organizations or on specific categories of groups, such as suffrage associations or Black women's clubs. Scott brings this work and her own research together into a coherent whole, presenting the reader with a compelling picture of the impact of women's associations on women's lives, on the lives of their communities, and on American society.

Scott's main argument is that women, "constrained by law and custom in the ways they could achieve goals that seemed to